



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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13 December 2005

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India: Castes for Tamils living in the State of Tamil Nadu; whether Tamils belong to a specific caste; whether they are related to the untouchables (Harijans or Dalits); whether they face any problems with other castes or with the authorities because they belong to a particular caste (2003 - December 2005)

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The magazine *New Internationalist* explains the caste system as follows: "[T]he Indian caste system is probably the oldest social hierarchy in the world. It is difficult to place a firm date on its origin as the system evolved over time into a rigid social hierarchy. ... A person remains in the same caste from birth to death and caste is handed down from generation to generation" (July 2005). There are four principal groups in the Indian caste system: the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatriyas or Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaishyas or Vais (merchants and traders) and the Sudras or Shudras (labourers and artisans) (*New Internationalist* July 2005; HRW Sept. 2001). "A fifth category, now often called Dalits, is outside the system; at the bottom of the hierarchy. It consists of those popularly known as 'Untouchables', and officially known as 'scheduled castes'" (*New Internationalist* July 2005). According to an Indian newspaper, Dalits or Untouchables are also known as "Depressed Class or Oppressed Class, Harijans, Scheduled Castes or the Broken People" (*The Hindu* 28 March 2004).

The following information was provided by a lecturer at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India, who has published extensively on issues pertaining to Dalits (TISS n.d.), including one publication specific to Tamil villages (see attachment, Ramaiah 1999):

There is no specific and separate caste for Tamil people or people of Tamil Nadu (People whose mother tongue is Tamil). Caste as a social institution divides the Hindus vertically as inferior and superior castes and [forces] them to strictly adhere to certain [arbitrary] rules which are in violation of human rights. Caste prevents marriages between castes. The so-called superior or upper caste people prevent marriages between the lower and higher castes by even going to the extent of killing such couples. The higher caste people treat the lower caste people as untouchables and do not allow them to engage in decent jobs to earn their living. The lower castes are often forced to do only menial and demeaning jobs like scavenging and sweeping. They subject the lower castes to inhuman treatments like the raping the lower caste (Dalit) women and parading them naked and sometimes even forcing them to eat human excreta for minor faults. Centuries of such inhuman practices have created an unpardonable enmity in the minds of the lower castes (Dalits) against the higher castes. Thus the relationship between castes has never been cordial. They often fight against each other, one to prove his caste superiority and the other to protect his basic human dignity. So, the Tamil speaking people as a whole cannot be considered always as one single group since they belong to different caste groups which are diverse and mutually exclusive caste groups placed one over the other vertically and thus traditionally antagonistic towards each other. Thus, the Tamils do have problems among themselves.

The characteristics of caste [are] same throughout India and wherever the Hindus are present. [The] [c]aste system in Tamil Nadu is the same as it is elsewhere. If the Tamil Officer belongs to a superior or upper caste, it is likely that he will discriminate [against] the lower caste Tamil officer and lower caste people in general. Generally such problems are addressed here by making the lower caste person [an] officer who cannot afford to ignore or ill-treat the higher caste Tamils (9 Dec. 2005).

One source states that "[i]n Tamil Nadu, as in the rest of the country, the caste system is still strong" (India Travelogue n.d.) and an Internet encyclopedia indicates that "[t]he particular features of the caste system vary considerably from community to community and across regions. Small geographical areas have their own group-specific caste hierarchies. There are thus thousands of castes in India" (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia n.d.). One Indian Website reports that in Tamil Nadu "[t]here is an established caste system, and the traditional differentiations here are a lot more pronounced than in many other parts of the country" (Webindia123.com n.d.). The Website Asha for Education reports that the "caste system is well rooted in society" and that untouchability is still a problem in Tamil Nadu (n.d.).

According to the Indian magazine *Frontline*, 25 per cent of the population in rural Tamil Nadu are Dalits who live separately from other castes throughout the state (7 - 20 May 2005). The *Statistical Handbook 2004* of the

Government of Tamil Nadu gives the following statistics for population of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Tamil Nadu based on their 2001 census: out of a population of 62,405,679, there is a total of 11,857,504 belonging to scheduled castes; 8,308,890 for rural scheduled castes and 3,548,614 for urban scheduled castes (2004). Of the total population, 19 per cent belong to scheduled castes (Tamil Nadu 2004).

Many sources reported inter-caste violence in India and discrimination against Dalits or lower castes (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Intro.; HRW May 2005; *ibid.* Jan. 2005; Freedom House 11 Aug. 2005, 291; ALRC 11 Feb. 2005, 2; *The Indian Express* 12 Jan. 2005; *The Hindu* 28 March 2004). More specifically, the United States Department of State reports "[i]ntercaste violence ... was especially pronounced in ... Tamil Nadu" (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5) and Freedom House states that "members of the lower castes ... continue to routinely face unofficial discrimination and violence. The worst abuse is experienced by the 160 million dalits" (11 Aug. 2005, 291). In its yearly report for 2005, Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicated that

Dalits, or so-called untouchables, continue to face violence and discrimination in nearly every sphere of their lives. Abuses against Dalits range from harassment and use of excessive force by security forces in routine matters, to mutilations and killings by members of other castes for attempting to cross caste barriers. Not only do authorities regularly tolerate such discrimination and violence, in some instances they actively encourage it (Jan. 2005).

Many sources reported that Dalits faced discrimination with regard to access to aid following the tsunami disaster in December 2004 (ALRC 11 Feb. 2005; *The Indian Express* 12 Jan. 2005; HRW May 2005; MRG 13 Jan. 2005). A written statement by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) to the United Nations indicated that some districts in Tamil Nadu received no relief because they are populated by Dalits (ALRC 11 Feb. 2005, Para. 2). It also reports that legislation and commissions implemented to address caste-based discrimination are essentially failures and do not provide adequate compensation or remedy to victims of such discrimination (*ibid.*, Para. 6-9). *The Indian Express* states that "most of the Dalits have not been allowed to share the relief material like food, shelter, medicine, toilets and others" and that "the government initiated separate camps for Dalits and others" (12 Jan. 2005).

On 16 May 2004, a Dalit settlement in the village of Kalapatti in Tamil Nadu was attacked by upper-caste members (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005; UN 23 Feb. 2005; DHRM n.d.; *Frontline* 19 June - 2 July 2004). According to the sources, approximately 100 houses were burnt down by a group of 200 people and Dalits trying to escape were assaulted, including reports of sexual assault of women (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005; UN 23 Feb. 2005; DHRM n.d.; *Frontline* 19 June - 2 July 2004). The attack was perpetrated by members of the dominant caste, called Gounder, of that region (*ibid.*; DHRM n.d.).

Although no information could be found as to the specific names of the various castes found in Tamil Nadu, some sources indicated that "Meenavar" is an upper caste (HRW May 2005; *The Indian Express* 12 Jan. 2005) while "Arunthathiyar", "Pallars" and "Parayars" are considered to be dalits or casteless (*Frontline* 19 June - 2 July 2004; Ford Foundation 28 Apr. 2004). According to India Travelogue, in Tamil Nadu, "the poorest low-caste villagers live in segregated areas called *ceri*" (n.d.).

The police department of the State of Tamil Nadu indicated, in their policy note for 2005-2006, that "[n]o major caste clash was reported in the State during the year 2004 ... [and] [o]nly 15 isolated incidents of caste clashes involving two deaths were reported in 2004," and that there were no deaths related to caste clashes and two reports of incidents as of the end of February 2005 (Tamil Nadu n.d.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Attachment

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